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SUBJECT: TURKEY: FESTIVE NEVRUZ CELEBRATIONS PASS WITHOUT
MAJOR VIOLENCE

REF: A. ANKARA 559
[1](#)B. ANKARA 574

1.(U) This is a joint message from Embassy Ankara, ConGen
Istanbul and Consulate Adana.

2.(SBU) Summary: Kurds throughout Turkey celebrated Nevruz
on March 21 in ceremonies that were festive and mostly
peaceful, despite earlier predictions that tension in
southeastern Turkey would lead to violent clashes with
security forces (reftels). At a GOT-sponsored Nevruz
celebration in Ankara, PM Erdogan called for Turkish citizens
to embrace diversity, and promote peace and unity. In
Istanbul, tens of thousands attended mostly peaceful
Democratic Society Party (DTP) organized celebrations in
Kazlıcesme square. As celebrants began to exit, police
dispersed the crowd with tear gas and rubber bullets, and
detained 70 people, after several hundred protesters chanted
pro-PKK slogans and held Ocalan posters. Events in
Southeastern Turkey drew massive crowds and were generally
peaceful, though police detained groups of pro-PKK
demonstrators at all events. Organizers believed the GOT's
prohibition against celebrating Nevruz on a weekend lowered
attendance. Both government and security forces appear to
have reached out to help avoid violence. End summary.

Ankara: Prime Minister Calls for Peace, Unity

3.(U) Hundreds gathered to peacefully celebrate Nevruz at
the official Ankara ceremony organized by the Culture
Ministry. PM Erdogan delivered remarks during which he
recited several poems and called for peace and unity among
all citizens of Turkey. After stating, "The seeds of hatred
should burn in the Nevruz fire," Erdogan lit the traditional
bonfire along with Ministers of State Mehmet Ali Sahin and
Besir Atalay, and Culture Minister Atilla Koc. The ministers
all partook in the traditional jumping over the fire, but the
PM passed due to a back injury.

Even the TGS Made a Gesture

4.(U) Even the Turkish General Staff made a gesture aimed at
diffusing tensions, posting an unprecedented "Happy Nevruz"

banner on their website.

Nevruz in Istanbul

5.(U) Istanbul Governor Muammer Guler and Istanbul Mayor Kadir Topbas presided over the official GOT Nevruz celebration in the Sultanahmet district. The small, quiet official ceremony contrasted with the event organized by DTP and several smaller pro-Kurdish parties, where 30-50 thousand Istanbulites gathered in Kazlicesme square. Before celebrations began, police clashed with approximately 50 protesters who carried posters supporting jailed PKK leader Ocalan. Reinforcements were able to calm the situation.

6.(SBU) Celebrants performed Kurdish folk dances and songs, lit and jumped over traditional Nevruz bonfires. During the event, a handful of demonstrators waved PKK flags and pro-Ocalan posters, despite admonitions by the organization committee against doing so. DTP's Istanbul branch chairman Dogan Erbas led a minute of silence in memory of "martyrs of democracy," and then delivered a speech in which he demanded an end to the military operations in Southeastern Turkey, and demanded the freedom of DTP politicians recently arrested by security forces (ref B). DTP Deputy Chairman Sirri Sakik said during his speech that Kurds do not have equal rights with Turks, and that "PKK is our reality, and PKK is here."

7.(U) As celebrations wound down and the crowd began to disperse, a group of 150 demonstrators raised pro-Ocalan posters and shouted pro-PKK slogans as a police helicopter hovered over the square. Police used tear gas and plastic bullets to disperse the crowd, and detained 80 people,

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including Erbas, Sakik, and six members of the organizing committee.

Southeastern Turkey: Celebrations Mostly Peaceful, Festive

8.(SBU) Nevruz celebrations in the southeast were, for the most part, peaceful and festive. Although numbers of Nevruz participants this year were reportedly down from last year, large turnouts were reported in Mardin, Batman, Van, Tunceli, Malatya, Adiyaman, Gaziantep, Sanliurfa, Siirt, and several other cities. Some snapshots:

--Adana: Adana consulate officers witnessed tens of thousands of people packing the Mimar Sionan Open Air Theater in Adana for the DTP-sponsored Nevruz celebration on March 21. People danced, shouted, and waved DTP flags. By noon, only two hours after the official opening of the venue, the Turkish National Police (TNP) told us they had arrested "as many as" 500 people, mostly for shouting pro-Ocalan slogans and carrying pro-PKK banners.

--Diyarbakir: Between 100,000 and 500,000 people attended Turkey's largest celebration, in Diyarbakir. When Diyarbakir Mayor Osman Baydemir delivered his speech, small groups shouted pro-Ocalan slogans despite repeated warnings by the organizing committee that they should only chant authorized slogans. Our contacts told us that 60-70 people were detained. Crowds in Diyarbakir carried placards reading, "Turkish unity requires Kurdish Unity," "This spring is the closes to freedom," and "Nevruz is the dawn of freedom for the Middle East peoples." Some of the banned slogans included, "The only solution in the Middle East is democratic confederalism," and "Your health is our health," a reference to the allegedly ailing jailed PKK leader Ocalan. Contacts believed charges might be pressed against the former DEP deputy (DTP forerunner party) Leyla Zana, who mentioned in her speech that Ocalan was one of the three most respected Kurdish leaders, the other two being Jalal Talabani and

Masoud Barzani. DTP Chairman Ahmet Turk lit the bonfire and a Kurdish-origin parliamentarian from the European Parliament, Feleknas Uca, also participated, as did Bianca Jagger.

--Van: Contacts told us festivities were peaceful and crowds, estimated at 50-100,000, were exuberant. Thirteen persons who had carried "Esteemed Ocalan" posters were detained. The Deputy Chairwoman of DTP, Aysel Tugluk, delivered a speech in place of the recently jailed DTP provincial chairman.

--Batman: Turkish Air Force jets made low-level passes during the celebrations but the mood among the 50,000 participants remained festive, according to our contacts. Four children were arrested for carrying pro-Ocalan posters, then released after police took their statements.

--Siirt: Contacts reported that crowds, estimated at 20,000, in PM Erdogan's parliamentary district hurled stones at police check points, and that 13 people were wounded including four policemen. The police used tear gas to disperse the crowd. Twenty people who displayed pro-Ocalan posters and carried yellow-re-green colored clothes resembling a Kurdish flag were detained after the celebrations concluded, but were later released.

--Mersin: Contacts told us that participation was lower than expected because the local authorities did not grant permission for the originally planned March 17 ceremony. Between 30,000 to 50,000 celebrated. The crowd was generally festive, but some people were attacked by an ultra-nationalist group in the street where an incident involving the desecration of a Turkish flag occurred two years ago. Fifty people at the scene were detained.

9.(SBU) Comment: The lack of violence during this year's Nevruz celebrations can be ascribed to several factors, including a conciliatory attitude from the top - the extent of GOT participation and the TGS website addition were unprecedented -- good coordination at the local level and a

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professional attitude by law enforcement on the scene. In Diyarbakir, for example, civil society worked hard to coordinate the efforts of all parties involved in organizing the events -- the DTP, Diyarbakir Mayor, provincial governor, and Nevruz event organizers -- and make sure that organizers discouraged provocations by participants. The PKK appears to have been on board with this policy of nonviolent propaganda.

The final and most important element was the TNP's restrained policing, which ensured that demonstrations did not escalate into violent clashes. These factors together succeeded in lowering the temperature in the Southeast and elsewhere so that the violent events of last year did not reoccur. End comment.

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